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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study gathered data regarding the supervision of school counselors across the state of Kentucky to find out the nature of supervision being provided to school counselors and the ratio of students to counselors from a representative sample across the state's eight service regions. Superintendents (N=100) were contacted by telephone and asked to report the supervision structure and student-counselor ratios for their districts. Descriptive statistical data is reported. Data collected revealed that many of the school counselors who were questioned were being supervised by administrative professionals, such as principals, who are not required to have training in counseling theories and techniques. In addition, many of the school districts have less than ideal student-counselor ratios. The results imply that school counselors are lacking in specific counseling-related supervision for the primary services they provide. Student-counselor ratios are so high that it is unrealistic to think that school counselors are providing an adequate amount of direct counseling services for which they were hired to perform. Suggestions for future research and implications for school counselors are discussed. (EMK)

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School Counselor Supervision in Kentucky:

A Contradiction in Terms?

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Abstract

This exploratory study gathered data regarding the supervision of school counselors across the state of Kentucky to find out the nature of supervision being provided to school counselors and the ratio of students to counselors from a representative sample across the state's 8 service regions. Data collected revealed that many of the school counselors are being supervised by administrative professionals who are not required to have training in counseling theories and techniques. In addition, many of the school districts have less than ideal student-counselor ratios. The results infer that school counselors are lacking in specific counseling-related supervision for the primary services they provide. Also, student-counselor ratios are so high that it is unrealistic to think that school counselors are providing an adequate amount of direct counseling services for which they were hired to perform. Suggestions for future research and implications for school counselors are discussed.

Introduction

The supervision of school counselors is an important concern in the educational and counseling fields. A significant aspect of the school counselor's job is to stay abreast of new issues in counseling and to be able to implement the appropriate interventions when necessary. Some current concerns within the field include dealing effectively with child emotional problems, crisis intervention, and parental conflict resolution. Moreover, in the near future, many school counselors may be faced with providing even more intensive clinical counseling than they currently perform, given the increasing counseling needs of students with respect to the issues of: suicide, sudden death, acts of individual and gang violence (Thompson, 1995), depression (American Psychiatric Association, 1992), the effects of impoverished living conditions (Dryfoos, 1994), and Attention Deficit Disorder (Erk, 1995), among others. In fact, the National Advisory Mental Health Council (1990) reports that 15% to 22% of children in the United States are estimated to have mental health problems requiring treatment and less than 20% receive it (Tuma, 1989). But despite this, Lockhart and Keys (1998) reveal that community mental health centers are diminishing and point out that school counselors may need additional training to provide treatment for more intensive mental health problems. Unfortunately, there is a lack of professional counseling or clinical supervision for school counselors regarding clinical counseling activities (Barrett and Schmidt, 1986).

Despite the need for ongoing professional counseling supervision, most school counselors are supervised by non-clinical school administrators such as principals. The majority of these administrative positions require little or no formal training in counseling theory and

practice for certification (Kentucky Department of Education, 1996). As a result, counselors are left to seek their own informal supervision for the clinical activities that they perform, which may or may not be readily available. The ultimate outcome of the lack of professional counseling supervision will be negative school and student outcomes.

However, in addition to the counseling and clinical services that they provide, counselors also perform many administrative tasks which are appropriately directed by an administrative supervisor. Acknowledging this point, Barrett and Schmidt (1986) proposed a supervision model that includes administrative and clinical supervision of school counselors by respectively trained and qualified professionals. Henderson and Lampe (1992) defined clinical supervision as feedback regarding specific counseling interventions with students, and using Barrett and Schmidt's clinical supervision model, reported improvements in the quality of services provided by the counseling department in their sample school.

One national survey of school counselors, investigating the degree of supervisory activities after placement in the job market, revealed that 50% of the respondents reported no post-degree supervision for counseling interventions (Borders and Usher, 1992). In addition, Roberts and Borders (1994) surveyed North Carolina school counselors regarding supervision on administrative and counseling issues such as scheduling and group counseling respectively. Their results showed that most counselors received administrative supervision by the principal of their school and no supervision for clinical issues, even though they spent a substantial amount of

their time in counseling activities. Finally, in a similar study, Sutton and Page (1994) surveyed school counselors in Maine and discovered that while 48% of the school counselors expressed a desire to receive some type of clinical supervision, only 20% of the respondents reported receiving such supervision.

In 1990, the American School Counseling Association, the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision and the American Counseling Association banded together in a national effort to improve the pre- and post-degree training of school counselors. Continuing professional counselor supervision was targeted as a specific goal in this effort (Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, 1990). The studies cited in this review, dated after the 1990 efforts of professional organizations, indicate a failure by public schools and public school policy makers to actively address the provisions set forth by the national counseling organizations in their attempt to correct the lack of counseling supervision for school counselors.

Another important aspect of the school counselor's role in providing adequate counseling interventions for students, although much less addressed in the literature, is the student-to-counselor ratio. Many schools maintain a high student-to-counselor ratio and, as a result, school counselors have reported difficulty with finding time to provide effective interventions to the students who need such services (Mustaine, 1996). Not surprisingly, Mustaine (1996) found a discrepancy between counselors' "preferred" versus "actual" time performing counseling-related activities. She further reported that although counselors preferred counseling-related activities over administrative tasks, they spent significantly more time performing administrative duties. Among the reasons given for this discrepancy included high student-counselor ratios and assignment of mandatory non-counseling related tasks by administrative supervisors.

Supervision of school counselors and student-to-counselor ratios have especially been a concern in the Commonwealth of Kentucky where recent events in one school regarding unsatisfactory supervision by pupil personnel services led to the deterioration of acceptable counseling services. Criticisms surrounding this unfortunate situation have increased awareness of the importance of post-degree supervision of Kentucky school counselors. However, despite revisions to the certification standards for school counselors recently made by the Kentucky Department of Education (1996), there have been no provisions for supervision by professional counselors for school counselors regarding clinical activities and no mention of the numerous effects of a high student-to-counselor ratio on school counseling services.

In sum, the recent disintegration of counseling services in one school and the voids in the revised school counseling standards for Kentucky result in a need to more closely examine the nature of the current supervisory relationship for school counselors and the student-to-counselor ratios across the state. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to determine the nature of supervision that school counselors receive in schools across the Commonwealth of Kentucky and to identify the student-to-counselor ratios in the state's school systems. This information was used to infer how realistic the use of counseling services and interventions may be in various schools. A secondary purpose of this study was to promote a reduction in the student-to-counselor ratios and to suggest that schools develop a structure for counselors' supervision by a professional trained in the provision of counseling services.

Method

One-hundred out of 176 superintendents in the Commonwealth of Kentucky were contacted by telephone and asked to report the supervision structure and student-counselor ratios

of the schools in their districts in order to determine who the direct and immediate supervisors are for Kentucky's school counselors as well as the number of counselors available for students. In some cases, the authors calculated the student-to-counselor ratios based on the number of students and school counselors reported for certain school systems.

Data from 100 out of 176 counties was collected. Categories were developed to indicate ideal, acceptable, and unacceptable student-counselor ratios, based on the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommendations for school counseling services (American School Counselor Association, 1997). The American School Counselor Association recommends an ideal and realistic student-counselor ratio to be 250-1 in order for school counselors to spend the recommended 70% of their time in direct counseling-related services to students. Since none of the schools surveyed in Kentucky had student-counselor ratios of 250-1and no state regulation for counselors to spend 70% of their time in direct service to students, the authors assigned more realistic ratio categories. Ratios of less than 400-1 were labeled "Ideal", ratios between 400-1 and 500-1 were considered "Acceptable", and ratios greater than 500-1 were considered "Unacceptable."

In order to assess counselors' supervisory experience, six categories representing various administrative job titles were distinguished. These titles were those reported by the superintendents' office in response to the question, "Who acts as direct supervisor to the counselors in your district?" The categories were identified as follows: "Principal", "Certified Administrative Supervisor", "Coordinator/Director", "Counseling Supervisor", "Superintendent" and "Director of Pupil Personnel."

Results

Descriptive statistical analyses revealed that 74% of the direct supervisors of school counselors were Principals, 7% were Coordinators/Directors, 6% were Superintendents, 2% were Counseling Supervisors, 5% were Directors of Pupil Personnel, and 5% were Certified Administrative Supervisors (See Table 1).

Calculations of student-counselor ratios revealed that out of 100 districts samples, 14 of the districts were identified as "Ideal", 44 were classified as "Acceptable", and 40 were considered to be "Unacceptable." The reported ratios ranged from 300-1 (Ideal) to 1175-1 (Unacceptable) indicating a wide range of variability among the state's school systems.

Discussion

The results of this preliminary investigation indicate that the vast majority of school counselors across the Commonwealth of Kentucky are supervised by administrators who are not practicing counseling and who are not required to be trained in counseling theory, techniques, and process. This shows that Kentucky's school counselors are lacking in specific counseling-related supervision for the primary counseling services which they were hired to provide, a contradiction that must be rectified. Counselors, however, also are required to perform a variety of administrative tasks as outlined in their job descriptions, and the issue of whether they should spend less time in administrative tasks as opposed to direct counseling services has never been fully resolved (Mustaine, 1998). Nevertheless, school counselors are trained specifically in counseling theory and techniques, not in administrative service, therefore they do provide direct counseling services that require at least perfunctory supervision by a counseling-trained professional.

In 40% of Kentucky's school districts, student-to-counselor ratios are so high that it is difficult to envision school counselors' effectiveness in addressing the counseling needs of the students for whom they are responsible. This is especially true when taking into account the additional administrative duties required by the majority of school counselors. The obvious, though not always financially possible solution to this dilemma is to hire more school counselors. Increasing the number of counselors, and thereby lowering the student-counselor ratio, would most certainly result in an improved ability to meet students' counseling needs, while significantly reducing the administrative duties performed by individual counselors. In addition, if all counselors are provided supervision by qualified, practicing counselors, it follows that they will be more prepared to better assess students' counseling needs and more prepared to implement more effective counseling services.

There are several caveats to consider with regard to this study. The research conducted was exploratory in nature and intended to serve as a preliminary investigation into assessing school counselors' attitudes, abilities and experiences. For this reason, only descriptive statistics were computed for the data, therefore, inferences are tentative and should be considered speculative. However, the findings in this study are valuable in that they provide a basis for more in depth investigation on the nature of supervision in Kentucky schools and counselors' needs and experiences regarding such supervision. Finally, the sample was drawn from Kentucky and therefore no comparisons can be made to other states. Future studies should include data from several states, especially those in the same region, in order to obtain a more complete understanding of students' and counselors' experiences in the American education system.

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Table 1

Job Titles and Frequencies of School Counselor Supervisors in Kentucky

Supervisor Job Title	Total Number Out of 100
Principal	74 (74%)
Coordinator/Director	7 (7%)
Superintendent	6 (6%)
Certified Administrative Supervisor	5 (5%)
Director of Pupil Personnel	5 (5%)
Counseling Supervisor	2 (2%)

Note. n = 100.